



Lewis & Clark  
**Public  
Health**

Environmental Services Division

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## **Cold Weather Signals Start of Air-Quality Monitoring Season**

Winter weather is on the way, and with it will come temperature inversions that can trap air pollution over the Helena Valley. On cold and windless days and nights, air quality can deteriorate quickly when chimney smoke and vehicle exhaust collect under a layer of warmer air.

On Nov. 1, Lewis and Clark Public Health began daily air-quality monitoring in its annual effort to protect the health of area residents. When air quality is poor, the department will issue temporary restrictions on indoor and outdoor burning throughout the Air Pollution Control District, which includes the North Valley and the communities of Helena and East Helena. During these episodes, you may be restricted from using solid-fuel burning devices like fireplaces and woodstoves until the public health risk diminishes.

The air monitoring season ends Feb. 29.

### **Air Quality Designations**

Under the Lewis and Clark County Outdoor Air Quality Regulations, the department designates air quality using these terms:

- **GOOD** – Particulate levels are low, and there are no restrictions on the proper use of solid-fuel burning devices.
- **WATCH** – Air quality is moderate, and particulate levels are not expected to improve. You will be asked to voluntarily avoid or reduce the use of solid-fuel burning devices, especially fireplaces and stoves that aren't certified by the Environmental Protection Agency. A list of certified stoves is available on the health department website at [www.HelenaAir.org](http://www.HelenaAir.org).
- **POOR** – Particulate levels are high, and the National Weather Service predicts poor dispersion conditions. Indoors, you may use only pellet stoves and EPA-certified burning devices. Smoke emitted from these devices may not exceed 20 percent opacity. You can achieve this by following proper burning practices (see below).

*Our mission is to improve and protect the health of all Lewis and Clark County residents.*

Weather conditions can change quickly, and you may be fined if you violate burning restrictions during a “poor” air stage. So it’s important to check air quality if you plan to burn.

To learn the daily status of local air quality, check local media, call the health department’s 24-hour air quality hotline at 406-447-1644, or sign up for daily e-mail updates at [outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov](mailto:outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov).

### **Exemptions and Variances**

Individuals enrolled in the Low Income Energy Assistance Program or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families Program may apply for an exemption to burn an older wood-burning device when the air quality is “poor.” Anyone whose gas or electric heating system is temporarily inoperable may also be eligible for an exemption. If you don’t meet the exemption requirements, you may apply for a variance to the regulations.

Exemption and variance application forms are available by calling 406-447-8351.

### **Proper Burning**

Smoke from woodstoves is the primary source of winter air pollution in Lewis and Clark County. Exposure to wood smoke can cause reduced lung function, headaches, and chronic bronchitis. It can also aggravate existing lung disease.

You can minimize these negative health effects by burning a clean, hot fire. This will also cut back on creosote buildup in your chimney, which will reduce the chances of a chimney fire, as well as the amount of wood you burn – saving time and money.

Here are some tips for burning properly and with less pollution:

- Make sure your stove is the right size for your needs. If your stove is too large, you will need to damp down your fires, causing smoldering.
- Use only dry, well-seasoned, medium-sized wood.
- Start your fire with small, dry kindling to establish a hot flame.
- Don’t pack too many logs in your stove or fireplace. Smaller, hotter fires are more efficient and less polluting.
- Keep air intakes/ dampers open enough to maintain a clean, hot fire.
- Check and clean your chimney regularly to avoid creosote buildup.

It’s illegal in Montana to burn prohibited materials, such as garbage, building materials, plastics, and hazardous waste.

For more information, call the Environmental Services Division of the health department at 406-447-8351 or e-mail [outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov](mailto:outdoorAQ@lccountymt.gov).

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